

OUR LIFE

A MODERN REQUIEM

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THE NARRATOR

In memory of one beloved we gather here—
In memory of one we loved.

Some lived that would now deeply mourn,
Had they lived on;
But they feel grief no more.
Like them this one shall not again know grief,
And never pain,
And never loss or relinquishment.

And yet we come to speak a common grief,
We come to tell a common sorrow,
For we are human.

But, being human, we would have
The human vision of the larger whole.
For each, unique, in soul and sense alone,
Is set to live with others of his kind,
And then give place to them that follow after.
And each is set to live with other species
On the spreading earth,
With hillside trees and grasses of the plain,
To share a common chemistry with those that live
In dark and cold and heavy ocean deeps,
With winged birds that love the ardent sun,
And every moving thing that breathes the air.

But all of these are made of atoms, only atoms,
Intricate, numberless, intermingling atoms,
Borrowed for the moment from the inanimate.

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THE INANIMATE

Find me language, mind of man.
I am space and fields of force.
I am time, ceaseless and limitless.
I am energy, boundless and infinite.
I am stuff of mountains and of stars.

Rejoice in your knowledge, O man.
Seek the way of the lightning.
Find the fringes of the garment of space.
Consider the mysteries of a dewdrop,
And the majesty of Orion.—
But not for me—

It is nothing to me that you consider.
Let another billion suns
Blaze another billion years
Beyond the ken of the conscious,
It is nothing to me—
It is not for me that you consider.

For I am energy of mass and molecule,
Energy of electron and light.
Let my Niagara whisper to your contrivances.
Let them suggest to your lamps the sun,
Energy is not lost—
Potential, kinetic—kinetic, potential—
Each instant pristine, complete,
Bound in matter or free in light.

Snatch at me with your grappling-hooks.
Scratch them on a paper.
Symbols. Symbols.
You know only symbols,
And they are all that you may know,
Unless you can walk upon the margin of the universe
Hand in hand with light.

And I.—

What have I done? What have I done?
Has colloid made conspiracy with colloid?
What is this that is neither matter nor light?
I understand the melting of the snow;
But this green leaf that turns to greet the sun,
This breathing beast that moves,
And stops, and moves again.
I understand the melting of the snow;
But why the cup of water to a child?
Why the voices and the violins?
Why the temples and the bells?
Why the sudden pallor and the tears?

I grow not old.
I neither wax nor wane.
I hasten not.
I, that am not mortal, seek no immortality.
For I am space and fields of force.
I am time, ceaseless and limitless.
I am energy, boundless and infinite.
I am stuff of mountains and of stars.

THE ANIMATE

From the film of matter that makes so beautiful
The warm and nourishing earth,
Finding form in root and leaf and stem,
Finding wings for air, and fins for water,
And hooves to strike the sod,
I speak;
And my words are not words of tempest
Nor earthquake nor fiery mountain nor persistent sun.
I have responsiveness and adaptation.
I have awareness and eagerness and aspiration.
I am the Living.

Behold, O man, the multitude.

A myriad insects drift on vibrant wings
Above a sunny meadow in the South.
Another myriad creep beneath the meadow grass,
Or seek the coolness of the sheltering soil;
While high above,
A living cloud of feathered forms
Moves light and free.
And these are all in one small vale
Of the many-valleyed earth.

Behold the multitude, the multitude.

Lift for me the pages of the book of life.
Trace with childish finger the strange forms.
What have I not invented, what not tried,
That could endure this ever changing earth?
Find the crumpled pages.
Then the earth was young.
Warm was her cloudy garment with the body's warmth.
What untold years I dwelt content
Within the stormy waters of those seas,
Till I had learned to drink like ruddy wine
The strong effulgence of th' increasing sun.
For me then came the rising rocks,
The winds, the rains.
For me warm seas of Silurian time.
For me unmeasured swamp lands, league on league.
By day, by night the lightning lashed
The lazy nitrogen to toil,
While I with mighty labor locked
The vagrant carbon in his dungeon dark.
Days flashed for me, and years were gone.
At length, O long ago, came clearer air,
Came uplands of the Mesozoic time,
Cool seas, and far, unclouded skies.

Now why should man,
On flimsy pages,
Try to write
My epic that already lies
Long-etched within the rock?
I am mistrustful of the mind of man,
And what it writes.
Have I not seen on red'ning altar slain
His dearest to sadistic deities?
Have I not seen the packs that hunt the packs,
And drive from homes destroyed with minds distraught
The peaceful folk?
I am mistrustful of the human mind.
Yet I have sometime seen it touch,
With tender and creative love,
The petals of the poppy and the rose.

Consider, O man, the continuity of the living,
The infinite succession of cells, my abode,
The reproductive cells eternally repeated,
In each the gathered skein, the split threads, the living strands,
The mystic ritual of cell union—
Ovum and sperm cell, sperm and ovum—
For both a perfect preparation,
For both an intricate commingling—
Always the endless lottery,
Always the careful accounting.

Consider, O man, the marvel of growth,
The potent single cell, the varied many cells—
Division and growth, growth and division—
In each the gathered skein, the split threads, the living strands,
Each cell imparting to succeeding cells the plan,
The marvelous memory, the subtle chemistry,
The twain in aspect, mind and matter.

Turn back the pages of a single life,
Before there's comeliness or light of day,
Of reptile, bird, or mammal, yes, of man.—

How strange that each should write the symbol of the sea,
Some long-remembered line of life's long saga write,
While sleep the fossil fish within the rock,
A million and a million centuries concealed.

Behold the mystery.
Behold the multitude.
I am the living.

THE DIVINE

Paint me my portrait, O man.
Stretch on a frame the fabric of remembrances.
Choose the strong colors of thy mother's love,
The devotion of thy dearest,
The comfort of kindred minds,
And all thine own most burning aspirations.
Paint with free and bold stroke.—
I like thy painting, O man.
Though the colors fade into the fabric,
Thou hast done well.
Thou wilt do better tomorrow,
For I am ever yet to be portrayed.

Think not by prophet's word or golden altar
Thou canst exalt me.
I am exalted by courageous joy,
By righteous judgments, and by noble deeds.
These are, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord."

Consider and discern.
Believe and behold.
I am a child's prayer,
A saint's purpose, a sinner's anguish,
The sympathy of all for all bereaved.

Cease thy clamor, man, and thou shalt hear
Strains of endless music.
Tune thy soul to the perception

Of my multitudinous orchestra.
Hear the triumphant trumpet tones
Of them that have kept faith in life.
Hear the weaving melody of the violin.
They cherish beauty in the soul.
Hear the sounding and resounding bass
From brass and strings and drum.
These hearts hold courage though all else may fail.
Hearken to the flute, the love-note,
The aspiring clarinet, the joyful horn.
Give ear to the crescendo of my coming,
For I am the harmony of the whole
And ~~each~~ ^{all} unwavering notes.
Unto each be the joy of his own refrain
In the glory of the whole.

THE NARRATOR

We are human, and we mourn our dead.
They had their day, their little day.—

They will not know, as we must know,
The menace of the constant-tugging earth,
Nor wrecking winds, nor river's overflow,
Nor scorching heat, nor all-benumbing cold;
Nor will they feel against the body's health
The insidious onslaught of some hidden swarm;
Nor know the day by day relinquishment of youth.

Still other griefs they will not share with us:
The choice that seemed most fair and right
But proved in the event to be unwise,
The love that would give all for love
But brings not blessing to the one beloved,
The weakness and infirmity
When one has need for strength,
Frustrations, failures, and despondencies.

Nor need they see, as we must see,

Two mighty armies dealing death by night,
Crime and the punishment of criminals,
Poverty in the midst of plenty,
And all the strange insanities and inhumanities of man—
Brutal, blundering, bewildered man.
They are absolved—
They are absolved from seeing these.

We hear fond hopes of immortality.
We hear strange tales of the elusive mind.
But yet we find sustaining thought in this:
Today so many in their lives
Find peace and joy and happiness.
Tomorrow—tomorrow for mankind
Begins a nobler million years.
So we may believe,
And so endure
The still recurring grief,
When morning comes,
And one who loved it well
Does not awake;
Evening, and is not aware.

Supremely beautiful upon the reeling earth
Arose the fragile palace of a human life,
Made of memories inwrought with memories,
Rising as on a summer day a summer cloud,
Radiant with the light of hope,
Eager for the splendor of living,
And we, beholding it, rejoiced.
A little while it made our world more fair.
Tomorrow will not find it.
Even today it is not.
Blessed are beautiful memories.
And blessed are they that remember the beautiful.
Even though they mourn,
Blessed are they that remember.

Edmund Gale Jewett

